

# Saying 'Sorry': Corporate Apologies Posted to Twitter

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## **Saying 'Sorry': Corporate Apologies Posted on Twitter**

### **1. Introduction**

Apologies appear ubiquitous, occurring in different languages and historical periods, may be realised in various forms, and achieve different functions. This paper examines the apologies that are made by companies in response to customer complaints, published in a relatively new context: the microblogging site, Twitter. The media affordances (Hutchby, 2001) of Twitter suggest that the site is a potent context in which companies need to manage their reputation through remedial speech acts like apologies. Most Twitter accounts are publically available (Madden et al., 2013) and the asymmetrical relationship between members and those that 'follow' them lends itself to the one-to-many interactions typical of other forms of broadcast talk (Page, 2012a). However, unlike mainstream media, Twitter is typical of participatory trends in social media (Jenkins, 2006). Anyone with an Internet connection may set up a Twitter account and gain unparalleled, instant access to the accounts of other Twitter members including those maintained by corporations and their personnel. In so doing, Twitter has reduced the need for gate-keeping personnel such as agents or managerial staff to filter communication from customers or clients. A customer may give feedback directly to their favourite store or brand by sending them a public addressed message, participate in online competitions or in return be notified of the latest offers by following the Twitter account associated with a company. Twitter thus extends the conversationalising trends of contemporary public discourse (Thornborrow and Montgomery, 2010), where dyadic interactions that might otherwise take place in private, off line contexts (such as email or

telephone conversations) can be publically mediated, available for online scrutiny by the wider overhearing audience (Bell, 1991) of the general public.

The tractable interactions on Twitter result in “searchable talk” (Zappavigna, 2011) that can be commercially valuable as a form of electronic word of mouth (Jansen et al., 2009). The conventions developed within the discourse of Twitter by its users such as *@mentions* (the use of a Twitter username within a post, such as @emccorp or @selfridges), *hashtags* (#uktesco) and *retweets* (a re-posted a message, usually marked by the abbreviation ‘RT’) function within an attention economy where visibility is prized. By tracking the use of these conventions, companies can monitor customers’ talk about their brand, service or products. If a customer’s post is negative (for example, containing a complaint), then this may pose a risk to the company’s reputation and require a remedial response. As such, research in crisis communication has begun to recognise the value of Twitter as a site for apologies (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al. 2013), where Twitter’s affordances of immediacy and directness are well suited to the timely and sincere characteristics associated with a successful apology.

## **2. Linguistic and rhetorical approaches to apologies**

Apologies have attracted significant attention from a number of disciplines, including subfields in linguistics (especially in pragmatics, sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics) and communication (rhetoric, crisis communication and public relations). Scholars in these fields recognise that the form and function by which apologies are realised can vary, and there is debate surrounding the definition of the act itself. This study adopts Spencer-Oatey’s description of an apology as a “post-event speech act” (2008: 19), where the event in question (in this case, the customer’s complaint)

is perceived as requiring a remedial response (such as the apology). Customers can bring their complaints to the attention of the company in the public context of Twitter by including the company's username in their post, which causes the message to appear in the public timeline and the interactions folder of the company's profile. Once the company has received the message, they can respond by using Twitter's 'reply' function, which automatically includes the interactants' usernames and so will simultaneously publish the message in both the company's and the customer's profiles. The architecture of Twitter thus allows the complaint and apology to be directed to nominated addressees (the company and the customer), but also mediated in a public space that can be accessed by the 'overhearing' audience of any member of the general public viewing either account. An example of a typical interaction follows, where the customer expresses dissatisfaction with a food product.<sup>1</sup>

The worst meal I've ever had to eat in work. 1 (one) piece of beef. Terrible taste. Very disappointed @waitrose <http://t.co/S2uk62AX>

Mon, 13 Aug 2012 15:15

Just over an hour later, the company in question responded with a remediating message.

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<sup>1</sup> In all tweets quoted in this paper, the usernames of corporate accounts have been retained. All usernames and personal names of individuals have been anonymized. In all other respects, the content of the quoted material is as it appeared in the public timeline of Twitter.

@username Really sorry to hear this, please could you DM us your address,  
the shop you bought it in, Use By date and any printed codes

Waitrose Mon, 13 Aug 2012 16:24

Communication via Twitter is usually rapid and “noisy” (Cha et al., 2010). Failure to respond promptly to a complaint can lead to further offense. In the following example, the customer received the acknowledgement of their complaint two days after their initial post, leading the customer to post further negative messages about the company in the interim.

@waitrose thanks for ruining our day. Wife stuck @ westbury store 4got  
payment card and u can't take a card over the phone #customerfirst

Sat, 11 Aug 2012 11:34

@waitrose No reply? #customerlast

Sun, 12 Aug 2012 17:33

The potential for further complaints suggests that the need to mitigate negative, public posts which threaten a company's reputation is high, even when the scale of the offence may be relatively low (compared with national or international crises, for example). But, as yet, little is known about the forms of apologies that companies make to individual customers on Twitter.

Within pragmatics, the research literature traces a number of paths through the far ranging and varied forms of apologies. One path focuses on identifying the characteristics of apologies as a speech act (Blum Kulka et al., 1989; Shariati and Chamani, 2011; Tanaka et al., 2008). Other work has concentrated on the communicative style used to realise apologies, including the direct or indirect nature of the apology (Mills, 2003; Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2008; Rundquist, 2007). A third, distinctive area questions the function of apologies as a form of face work (Goffman, 1959) or as a rapport influencing strategy (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), highlighting the potential risks to the reputation of the person making the apology, and the opportunities that apologies present for re-establishing rapport between participants (Ogiermann, 2009). From a public relations perspective, the restored reputation and rapport might be framed commercially as the need to retain customers' brand loyalty and purchase attention where possible (Pace et al., 2010). The commercial imperative to re-establish rapport with their customers through an apology is illustrated neatly by the following response, which couples the sympathetic acknowledgement of the customer's complaint with an invitation to re-engage with the company.

@username We are sorry to hear that. You are welcome to return If and when you decide to come back. Thank you

Direct TV Tue, 24 Jul 2012 16:11

Within pragmatic research on apologies, most work has examined data in some form of spoken discourse, or written projections of conversation (for example, elicited through discourse completion tasks or dialogue contained in drama).

Likewise, the focus has concentrated on interactions that take place in the private domain, and linguistic studies which examine apologies made in public contexts are in their infancy by comparison (but see for example, Davies et al., 2007; Gruber, 2011; Harris et al., 2006; Kampf, 2009). Meier's (1998) overview of politeness rightly points to further limitations in existing research, where the methods of data collection may focus more on the perceived use of apologies, rather than analysing naturally occurring examples. Where naturally occurring examples have been used, often the sample is relatively small due to the infrequency of apologies in day-to-day interactions, or limited by observation techniques.

In contrast, research in crisis communication incorporates an extensive review of apologies made in the public domain, such as those in the mainstream media (television interviews) and in social media. However, most of the analyses focus on the apologies made by high profile figures such as celebrities (Kauffmann, 2012), sports figures (Brazeal, 2008), politicians (Kampf et al., 2012) and individual business leaders (Park et al., 2011), rather than on the wider behaviour that might contrast groups of participants. Typically, the crises in these studies are high scale (Lui et al., 2011), and in line with a rhetorical approach to apologia (Benoit, 1995; Coombs et al. 2010), the analysis has not focused on the linguistic form of the apologies (though see Hargie et al., 2010), and instead measure the perception of apologies as successful (or not).

Linguistic and rhetorical approaches to apologies share several areas of concern. Both fields debate which factors might influence the perception of an apology as successful (for example, whether the apology is judged as formulaic or heartfelt). Similarly, scholars in both fields distinguish between an apology's form and function, and recognise that these vary across modes of production and cultural

context. In order to trace the variation in apologies, both rhetorical and linguistic approaches have established frameworks that set out the strategies which typically co-occur with the routinized expressions of apology. Within pragmatics, the framework set out by Blum Kulka et al. (1989) has proved robust and been used to analyse data from a number of languages and cultures. According to this framework, apologies may include:

Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID): *We're really sorry*

Taking responsibility: *I made a big mistake* 😊

Explanation or account: *Unfortunately we are experiencing weather delays in PHL*

Offer of repair: *We're working hard to refund all original bookings*

Promise of forbearance: *I'll be more careful to avoid plot spoilers in the future*

Working within a rhetorical tradition, Benoit (1995) outlines fourteen strategies that can be used in image repair to position the speaker as more or less responsible for the perceived offence. While they do not map systematically onto Blum Kulka's categories, there are points of overlap. For example, the strategy of *mortification* may include IFIDs which signal the act of apologising, or statements which take responsibility as the apologiser admits wrongdoing. Similarly, Benoit's strategies for *corrective action* may include a promise of forbearance, or make an offer of repair to *compensate* the victim. In contrast, if the apologiser wishes to downplay their role in the perceived offence, they may include explanations which variously *deny* the offence or *evade responsibility*.

Pragmatic and rhetorical approaches can thus be regarded as complementary perspectives that can be brought to bear on similar phenomena (here, the corporate apologies posted on Twitter). But both fields also have research deficits, which the



present study serves to address in part. In comparison to earlier work on crisis communication, this study turns its attention to apologies prompted by mundane, frequently occurring customer complaints rather than high scale, individual crises, and examines the comparative behaviour of a group of companies rather than single, individual case studies. In addition, the study extends the pragmatic analyses of apologies by examining a large body of naturally occurring apologies from a set of participants who (from a linguistic perspective) are relatively understudied, and whose interactions are shaped by the media affordances of a relatively novel communicative context: Twitter. The paper is concerned with the form of the corporate apologies (as opposed to their function), and a participant-centred approach to the perception of the apologies is beyond the study's scope. Nonetheless, the distinctive formal features of the companies' politeness strategies are interpreted in the light of the potential face and rapport work that their interactions with customers might achieve as a form of image repair.

### **3. Data sample and methodology**

The data sample used for analysis consists of 1183 apologies posted to the micro-blogging site, Twitter. The posts are part of a wider corpus which consists of 177,735 tweets (1,693,464 words) gathered from 100 public Twitter accounts: 30 celebrities (15 men, 15 women), 30 'ordinary' members of Twitter (15 men, 15 women) and 40 corporate accounts. The celebrities and corporations were all selected on the basis of their reported use of Twitter (for example, cited as noteworthy in reports published by *Mashable*<sup>2</sup>), and represented interests and

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<sup>2</sup> *Mashable* describes itself as 'the largest independent online news site dedicated to covering digital culture, social media and technology.' The

expertise across a range of topics. All accounts posted tweets in English, although some accounts were North American and others British and so used American English and British English respectively. The data sample was collected in two stages: 90, 392 tweets were gathered in 2010-11, the remaining 87, 343 tweets were gathered in August 2012. As with any research, the composition of the dataset influences the analysis and interpretation of results. In this case, the research design which informed the collection of data was to enable a broad comparison between the use of Twitter by distinctive groups (corporations, celebrities and 'ordinary' members of the site), and to document the evolving use of Twitter by these groups over time (see Page, 2012a, 2012b). The composition of the dataset as a whole was not prompted by the intention to gather examples of apologies: the salience of this speech act became apparent from deductive scrutiny of the materials. As such, there are inevitable limitations to the data available, such as the focus on the responsive posts made by the company rather than a complete set of all dyadic interactions between the companies and their customers.

The methods used to analyse the apologies in the data set build on existing corpus-based and pragmatic research (Deutschmann, 2003). Concordancing tools (Antconc, 2011) were used to identify posts containing routinized expressions usually associated with apologies (based on Searle, 1969), and to quantify their relative frequency within the dataset. Admittedly, selecting the data on this basis cannot take into account other more indirect forms of apology (Mills, 2003) that might be made by members of Twitter. Nonetheless, Harris et al. (2006) provide compelling evidence that the formulae such as *sorry* and *apologise* are a crucial

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company runs regular articles which report on digital innovation and monitors social media usage by digital communities.

component in the general public's judgement of what counts as an apology: all the more important given the public reception of the apologies posted to Twitter.

Likewise, Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008) point out that starting with recognised lexical items is a useful first step when handling large-scale datasets such as the material considered in this study.

The second stage of analysis used the description of apologies outlined in Blum Kulka et. al. (1989) to code a smaller subset of the material, derived from the posts which contained the most frequently used lexemes associated with the speech act of apologising (*sorry* and *apologise*). In order to handle the manual coding of the messages, a random selection of half the messages containing *sorry* and *apologise* were considered in detail (1068 messages) along with all examples from the ordinary accounts (115 messages). Each message was coded for the components of the apology, any further speech acts included in the post, and for the stylistic features considered to indicate projected rapport between updater and audience (including use of names, emoticons and discourse markers). In the discussion that follows, these features are interpreted in the light of wider work in the field of politeness and in relation to Benoit's (1995) strategies of image repair.

#### **4. The frequency of apologies within the dataset**

Following the practice of Deutschmann (2003), the complete dataset was searched for the lexemes conventionally recognised as IFID: *regret*, *pardon*, *afraid*, *excuse*, *forgive*, *sorry*, *apology/apologies* and *apologise/apologize*. Any instances where the lexemes were not being used as an apology (such as 'I am afraid of the dark' or

‘there’s no excuse for buying shoes’) were discarded. The relative frequency of the lexemes is summarised in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

	<u>Corporate accounts</u>	<u>Ordinary accounts</u>
<i>Regret</i>	75	2
<i>Pardon</i>	1	1
<i>Afraid</i>	132	54
<i>Excuse</i>	6	28
<i>Forgive</i>	1	7
<i>Sorry</i>	3591	414
<i>Apology/apologise</i>	563	76

Table 1. Relative frequency of IFID forms in posts by corporate and ordinary accounts (per million words)

As the figures in Table 1 attest, the lemmas *sorry* and *apology* were the most frequently occurring IFIDs, with *sorry* outranking all other forms and found in posts by all the companies in the sample. The lesser used IFID lexemes appeared idiosyncratically: *regret* was used almost exclusively by one company (Dellcares), and 95% of the occurrences of *afraid* could be attributed to British companies. The distribution of *sorry* and *apology/apologise* thus forms the focus of the remainder of the paper.

*Sorry* and *apology/apologise* do not occur uniformly across the public timeline of Twitter. Rather, they occur more frequently in particular kinds of posts. The affordances of Twitter mean that the posts can be divided into three types according to how they are treated by the algorithms of the Twitter archive. *Updates* are reports

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<sup>3</sup> The frequencies of the lexemes *apology/apologies* and *apologise/apologize* are combined in the table as a single lemma.

in which the member shares an account of their current activity or an item of news with their Follower list.

Sampling the new Egg Bagel & Jalapeno Cream Cheese w/ the DD SoMe team. What a good combo! <http://t.co/IMpxjAia> ^JD

Dunkindonuts: Wed, 11 Jul 2012 21:00

*Addressed messages* are tweets that begin with a member's username (e.g. @americanapparel), and although published to the public timeline so that they can be seen by all Followers and the general public, will appear in the member's interactions folder and mimic one-to-one interaction.

@username - We'd love to see pictures. Organizing a garage is a big project. Congrats on getting it done.

Rubbermaid: Fri, 13 Apr 2012 13:11

*Retweets* are tweets that have been authored previously by another member and then forwarded by a second participant, in a similar fashion to email forwarding.

Retweets are automatically marked by the initial abbreviation, 'RT'.

RT @JobsforUSA: A terrific @NYTimes story featuring @starbucks program to create new, American-made products in East Liverpool, OH [http: ...](http://...)

Starbucks: Mon, 11 Jun 2012 22:51

The distribution of the different types of tweet across the dataset suggests that in 2010-11, celebrities, corporate and 'ordinary' Twitter members all favoured updates as the most frequently used type of tweet in their accounts (see Figure 1).

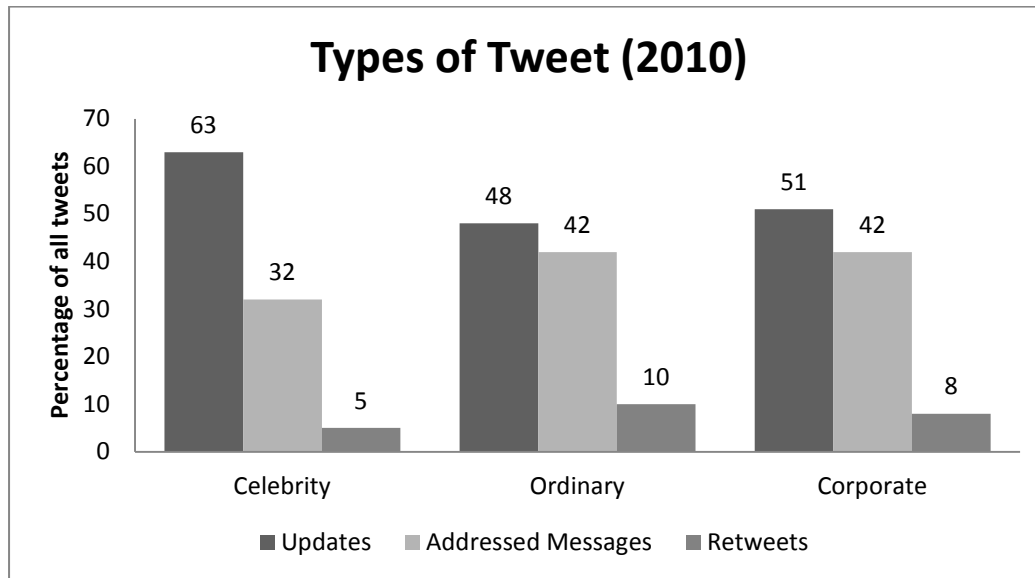


Figure 1. Comparison of tweet types in 2010

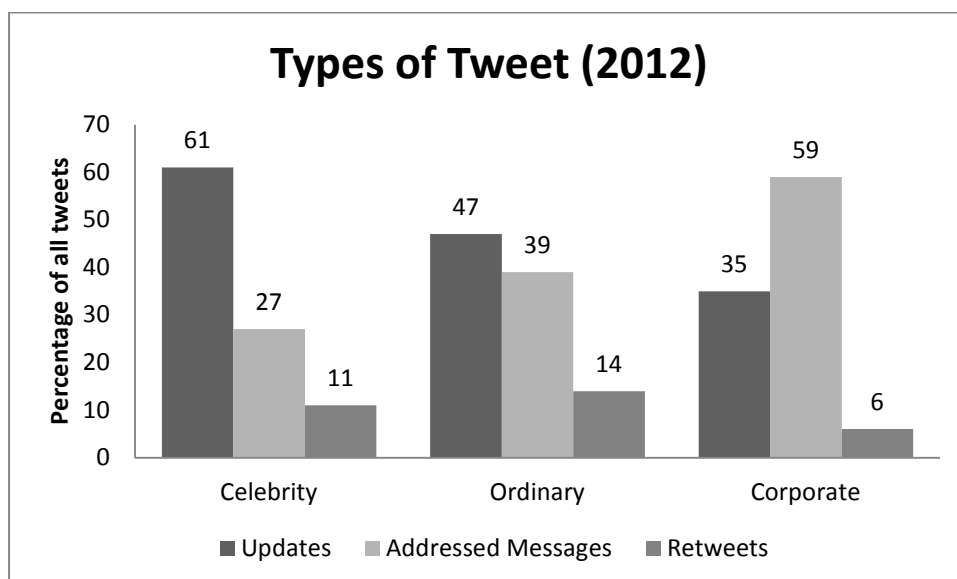


Figure 2. Comparison of tweet types in 2012.

In 2012, while the proportions of addressed messages and updates posted to Twitter from the accounts in this dataset remained remarkably similar for celebrity and ordinary accounts, for corporate accounts the frequency of addressed messages increased from 42 to 59 percent (see Figure 2). The increase in the addressed messages posted by corporate accounts suggests a shift away from one-to-many broadcasts towards interaction directed to individual Twitter members. The distinctive language in the addressed messages as indicated through keyness data suggests that a primary function of these interactions is to apologise to customers following a complaint.<sup>4</sup>

The list of keywords indicates the lexical items which occurred with significantly greater frequency in the addressed messages posted by corporate accounts, as compared with dataset as a whole is summarised in Table 2.

Rank	Frequency	Keyness	Keyword
1	4600	11359.08	<i>Hi</i>
2	5931	10458.99	<i>Thanks</i>
3	17047	9831.196	<i>You</i>
4	6934	8228.561	<i>We</i>

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<sup>4</sup> Keyness measures the unusual frequency of a word within a given text. As Scott (1997: 236) points out, this is distinct from high frequency alone, and is based on a statistical comparison of the frequency of words within a specialist corpus (here the addressed messages posted by corporate accounts) and a reference corpus (all the remaining posts in the Twitter dataset used in this study).

5	4534	6577.487	<i>Us</i>
6	2211	5672.007	<i>DM</i>
7	2093	4962.274	<i>Sorry</i>
8	6717	4382.442	<i>Your</i>
9	2201	4358.823	<i>Hear</i>
10	4848	4072.687	<i>Can</i>
11	2601	4050.361	<i>Help</i>
12	1781	3286.763	<i>Please</i>

Table 2: Keyword list for addressed messages posted to Twitter by corporate accounts.

The keywords in Table 2 include formulaic terms associated with speech acts such as greeting (*hi*), thanking (*thanks*), requests (*please*), and apologising (*sorry*). While these speech acts may clearly occur in a number of contexts and with a number of functions, typically, the keywords clustered together in addressed messages which functioned as an apology as illustrated in the following examples.

@username **Hi** [name deleted], **sorry** for your frustration. **Please** follow/DM us additional details regarding this and we can try to help. **Thanks**. ^SP  
WellsFargo Thu, 16 Aug 2012 15:43

@username I'm **sorry** about what happened. **Please** call our Food team on 0845 789 1234 so we can investigate this immediately. **Thanks**  
MarksandSpencer Mon, 13 Aug 2012 09:22



@username **Hi** [name deleted], very **sorry** this has happened. Are you able to return it to the store for a full refund? **Thanks**, [name deleted].

Sainsbury's Mon, 06 Aug 2012 08:26

It is not only corporate accounts who make apologies on Twitter using the conventional formulae, like *sorry* or *apologise*. However, as the keyword list suggests, the distribution of the lemmas *sorry* and *apologise* posted by 'ordinary' Twitter members contrast with those posted by the corporate accounts and are concentrated in the addressed messages. These apologies are thus framed as dyadic interactions (albeit dyadic interactions mediated for a general viewing public) rather than as one-to-many interactions, and are made in response to an initiating complaint from the customer, rather than initiated by the company itself.

## **5. Apologies and their accompanying strategies**

Unlike diachronic studies which suggest that in Present Day English, the illocutionary power of an IFID has increased so that items such as *sorry* can occur in isolation, the examples of the keywords in context suggest that this rarely occurred in this dataset: in fact, only one tweet in the entire dataset comprised of the IFID alone. In all other cases, the IFID was expanded to include further detail of the reported offence or was combined with other components of the apology or additional speech acts. As a first step, the apologies in this dataset were coded as to whether or not the apology restated the reported offence. Tweets could restate the problem, as in the following example.

@username Sorry **about the problem with the bathroom**. We'll make sure our airport leadership sees it.

Jetblue Wed, 08 Aug 2012 10:21

Or tweets could avoid restating the offence through ellipsis, cataphoric reference (*sorry about that*) or a generalised statement (*sorry for all ills*), as in the following messages.

@username Hi, I'm really sorry **about that**. Which store was this at and I'll speak to the Manager about it. [name deleted]

Sainsbury's Aug 2012 14:14

@username So sorry. We are working to reverse all unnecessary charges.

^BT

Southwestair Sat, 04 Aug 2012 16:43

@username Hear you loud and clear, and sorry for **all ills**. Standby for a msg from our Customer Relations Team please. ^BT

Southwestair Wed, 18 Jul 2012 02:53

The frequency with which corporate and ordinary accounts restated the offence which prompted the apology varied.

	Offence restated	Offence not restated

Corporate account	33	66
Ordinary account	58	42

Table 3. Percentage of apologies with the offence restated or avoided

As the figures in Table 3 suggest, corporate accounts avoided restating the reported offence twice as often in their posts (66 percent) as they declared the nature of the problem (33 percent). For ordinary Twitter members, the pattern is reversed, and the nature of the offence is more often declared (58 percent) than left implicit (42 percent). The tendency for corporate accounts to avoid restating the offence which is remediated through the apology can be interpreted in relation to the companies' face needs. Although there is debate regarding whether or not making an apology is face-damaging to the speaker (Ogiermann, 2009), restating the offence risks potential damage to the reputation of a company by publishing information that alludes to their faulty products or service, as do the following examples.

@username Hi, really sorry that you've been finding holes in your loaves.

Please give us a call on 0800 123456, option 5. We'll investigate.

Sainsbury's Fri, 03 Aug 2012 09:04

@username Sorry about your issue with Powerlink. I'll check on its status. In

the meantime, contact @EMCsupport if you have more questions.

EMCCorp Tue, 01 May 2012 04:53

On the other hand, apologies have the potential to restore rapport between company and customer. In order to do this, corporate accounts need to employ strategies which individualise their customers, for example by acknowledging the specific nature of their complaint. Using vague language, such as the cataphoric deictic in 'sorry about that', whilst distancing the apologisee from the offence (Deutschmann, 2003: 57), can be associated with a lack of sincerity (Brazeal, 2008: 148). This poses a dilemma for the company: to restate the offence and risk further damage to their reputation, or avoid restating the offence and risk damaging their rapport with the customer.

## **4.2 Explanations**

The extent to which a person can be held responsible for a reported offence has significant influence on the potentially face-damaging nature of apology components like "Taking on Responsibility" and "Explanation or Account." In this data sample, explicit admissions of responsibility were extremely rare, and occurred only once in an apology posted by an 'ordinary' Twitter member. While explanations occurred in apologies posted by both groups, companies included explanations less frequently than did ordinary Twitter members: 10% of apologies posted by companies and 27% of apologies posted by ordinary Twitter members included an explanation.

The relative infrequency of explanations in the apologies made by companies may relate to the potential for explanations to be face-damaging or face-saving, depending on whether or not the explanations allow the company to accept or deny responsibility for the offence. In this data sample, the explanations existed on a sliding scale between the opposing points of denying and accepting responsibility. In between the two extremes, the company might attempt to save face by giving

explanations that employ various image repair strategies which evade responsibility, for example, that attribute responsibility to a third party, or give evidence that the offence was caused by factors beyond the company's control, or be related to company practices (which in other circumstances may be to the benefit of customers, such as operating a loyalty scheme). Examples of each strategy follow.

At one extreme, companies may use Benoit's strategy of denial and claim that the offence did not occur.

@username Sorry you feel that way. Not giving anything away for free.

They're getting back their own money. Money others didn't find....

HRBlock Mon, 09 Jan 2012 14:28

Alternatively, they may try to evade responsibility by placing blame for the offence with a third party:

@username Sorry to hear that. The thing is we aren't following you. It must be some bot run by someone else

American Apparel Fri, 25 Sep 2009 00:45

@username Sorry. Issue with hootsuite! Follow @rubbermaid #rubbermaid

Rubbermaid Thu, 23 Feb 2012 20:12

Or they may give explanations which document factors outside the company's control such legal requirements, opening hours or the weather. These constraints

help to position the company as the acted-upon rather than agentive participant, and so dissociate the company from potential guilt (Hargie et al., 2010).

@username We operate a Think 25 policy, if you look under 25 our staff must ask for ID by law. Sorry for any frustration caused

UKTesco Wed, 15 Aug 2012 16:56

@username Hi there, sorry we can't respond to Twitter requests at weekends, but you can find our opening hours here: <http://t.co/FpdeRfLo>

JohnLewisRetail Mon, 23 Jul 2012 08:22

@username So sorry for the inconvenience. Weather is causing many delays tonight. We hope you'll give us another chance!

JetBlue Fri, 10 Aug 2012 02:14

Other explanations restate company practices as a means of making their actions justifiable (Benoit 1995).

@username Sorry about this - it's because we can't give change for Clubcard vouchers so purchases need to be the same value or more.

UKTesco Thu, 16 Aug 2012 18:25

@username Sorry, with the free product that has been the policy. That's why we allow folks to print or save it when they are finished.

HRBlock Mon, 16 Jan 2012 20:03

@username Sorry [name deleted], we're monitoring the feedback closely, the design change is for better freshness. Thanks

MarksandSpencer Thu, 09 Aug 2012 13:35

Other explanations use Benoit's strategy of minimization by indicating responsibility for the offence through linguistic constructions that downplay the company's agency.

@username Sorry for the ongoing issues caused by the Booking Office closure, there is a staff shortage in the area & we're working on it.

London Midland Mon, 13 Aug 2012 08:49

@username Sorry. We're reviewing our affiliate system and by human error deleted you from the programme. We've replied to your post

Selfridges Fri, 06 Jul 2012 10:01

Face-saving strategies of minimization include the use of non-human agents as responsible for the offence, such as the weather, a bot or an app:

**Weather** is causing many delays tonight

It must be some **bot**

Normally the **app** will load the fastest route.

Other messages use nominalisation to omit the company's direct agency, as in the "booking office closure" and "design change":

Caused by the Booking Office **closure**

The design **change** is for better freshness.

Finally, the messages might also background agency through the use of adverbial constructions, as in the clause, “By human error deleted you.” Typically, explanations are also characterised by deontic modality which emphasises the company’s obligations to comply with superordinate requirements, which rationalise the behaviour which has caused offence.

Our staff **must** ask for id

We **can’t** respond to Twitter requests at weekends

In combination, these strategies are used to mitigate the face-threatening potential of explanations by downplaying the agency of companies in relation to the reported events, or construing them as operating under the constraints of factors beyond their control.

### **4.3 Offer of Repair**

Like explanations, offers of repair function as face-saving strategies which allow the company to take corrective action. Offers of repair, like corrective action, rebuild the reputation of the apologist by constructing their agentive role in providing remedies for the situation: companies are presented as the source of solutions rather than the cause of the problem. At the same time, offers of repair are oriented towards the



needs of the addressee, and may re-establish rapport between company and customer, for example by complying with the sociality rights of customers to receive satisfactory goods or service for payment that has been made. The use of offers of repair to save face and rebuild rapport is employed more frequently by companies: 30% of apologies posted by companies as compared with 10% of apologies posted by ordinary Twitter members contained an offer of repair.

The offers of repair put forward in company apologies reflect the distinctive sociality obligations of companies towards their customers. Offers of repair in apologies by 'ordinary' Twitter members represent the Twitter member as directly responsible for remediating a relatively small scale offence, for example, where the apologisee offers to carry out the delayed activity (such as sending an email, or meeting a fellow Tweeter).

@username sorry dude, will get that emailed to you this week!

Male updater Wed, 30 May 2012 15:52

@username sorry [name deleted], only just seen you're reply - next time I'm over I'll pop in and say hi : )

Male updater Sat, 12 May 2012 17:07

However, in the case of the sociality rights between company and customer, the obligations may be governed by additional and particular regulations (for example, the expectation of satisfactory products or restrictions on the return of faulty goods), which may be heightened through economic pressures (such as the financial losses suffered by a customer who has wasted money on faulty goods, and the potential

financial loss to the company of the loss of a customer). The offers of repair reflect the economic and tangible nature of the recompense required to restore customer satisfaction, including “credits”, “refunds” and replacement goods.

@username Sorry to hear, we know our customers look forward to the inflight TV. You'll be getting a \$15 credit. <http://t.co/4RAynU7k>  
Jet Blue: Wed, 08 Aug 2012 11:46

@username Sorry to hear you're disappointed - please take your receipt and any pkg to store for a full refund. Thanks for tweeting  
Marks and Spencer: Sun, 05 Aug 2012 11:31

@username really sorry about that. If you're still there please ask them to remake your drink. We want to make sure you get what you ordered  
Starbucks: Tue, 26 Jun 2012 18:42:55

Unlike the offers of repair included in apologies by ‘ordinary’ Twitter members, companies often offer repair by reporting the problem for further investigation.

@username I'm really sorry you feel that way, we're very proud of our staff, our Customer Relations team will certainly investigate.  
London Midland: Mon, 13 Aug 2012 09:34

These offers of repair reflect the multi-party interactions in which company apologies are embedded, where the person posting the apology may not have the ability or

authority to offer immediate recompense, nor may it be appropriate for them to do so. Persons other than the Tweeter, such as store managers or “Customer Relations teams”, may be involved in further communication and responsible for providing reparation. In some cases, the reported offence may need to be clarified or verified before a solution can be put forward. The need for offers of repair suggests that a verbal apology alone may be insufficient remedy to restore customer satisfaction, and that the apology itself is only one element in a longer series of interactions distributed across multiple channels of communication including, but not limited to Twitter.

#### **5.4 Follow up moves: questions and imperatives**

The tendency for companies to embed apologies within longer interactions is evidenced by the inclusion of questions and imperatives in the messages containing an apology. Questions and imperatives do not occur uniformly across the dataset, but are most characteristic of the corporate apologies. The figures in Table 4 suggest a contrast where questions are more frequently used by companies than ordinary Twitter members (22% compared with 13%) and imperatives occurred exclusively in the apologies posted by companies (33% of apologies also contained an imperative).

	Corporate accounts	Ordinary accounts
Question	22	13
Imperative	33	0

Table 4: Percentage of apologies containing additional questions or imperatives

The questions that occur in combination with apologies are closely associated with the corrective actions signalled in offers of repair. For example, the questions may clarify the nature of the offence, in order to enable feedback to particular locations.

@username Sorry to hear that. Staff are on board the train. Can you advise what the rowdy passengers are doing so I can advise control team?

LondonMidland Sat, 11 Aug 2012 19:07

@username Sorry [name deleted]. Some franchisees do that sort of thing.

Which area? We'll pass on your feedback. Thanks. - ^sg

HRBlock Mon, 16 Jan 2012 17:45

Or questions may be used to clarify whether an offer of repair has been made,

@username Hi there, sorry about the problems you have had getting the TV.

Has a refund been arranged for you? Thanks, [name deleted]

Sainsbury's Tue, 31 Jul 2012 07:48

Or function as an indirect solution offered in response to the reported problem.

@username1 Sorry [name deleted], we have a wide selection of standard sizes in our Autograph range - have you seen these? Thanks

<http://t.co/atrYlcQp>

MarksandSpencer Thu, 09 Aug 2012 12:42

When used for these purposes, the questions can be considered as part of the face and rapport-restoring behaviour of dealing with the customer complaint by providing reparation.

It is clear that interactional goals of the apology extend beyond a single turn, which can include either or both task focused (to provide reparation for faulty goods and service) and relational (to restore good will between customer and company) aspects of the process. Both questions and imperatives function as requests for further interaction. This is not surprising, given the brevity of tweets (which are constrained to 140 characters), and the public nature of Twitter (which might not be appropriate to convey personal information like a customer order number or contact details). The imperatives and questions which request further interaction between company and customer can be divided into two types: those where interaction will be initiated by the company and those where interaction is invited from the customer. Examples of each follow.

@username Sorry about this. Let me look into this and I'll get back to you.

Waitrose Thu, 09 Aug 2012 16:58

@username Apologies with the delay, may I ask you to please follow/DM tag or order info to look into this? Glad to assist.^FY

Dellcares Wed, 08 Aug 2012 03:53

@username1 @username2 So sorry to hear this. Please drop us an email to explain what happened to: [social@selfridges.co.uk](mailto:social@selfridges.co.uk)

Selfridges Mon, 30 Jul 2012 15:37

The directives and requests that require the customer to initiate further interaction are inherently face-threatening, for they place the obligation to pursue reparation with the customer, not with the company. This is a risky strategy, for there is no guarantee that the customer will continue the interactions, and further good will (and future custom) may be lost. The greater face-threat of such requests is mitigated by the use of downgraders like conditionals (*if- clauses*), modal auxiliaries (*may, can*) and formulae (*please*), as in the above and following examples.

@username I am sorry this happened. If you can advise what Blu Ray it was I can certainly check when they have it in next

UKTesco Thu, 16 Aug 2012 19:45.

In contrast, the directives which place the responsibility for future interaction with the company are less likely to use downgraders to mitigate imperatives, as in the following example.

@username Hey, [name deleted] Sorry for your trouble and we'll get this fixed quick. Standby for a message from our Customer Relations Team. ^BT

Southwestair Fri, 03 Aug 2012 23:36

The difference in communicative style might be explained as follows: the greater the risk to the interactional goal of the company's apology, the greater the need to employ stylistic features which mitigate the face-threatening nature of the request.

## 5.5 Greetings, Closings and Terms of Address

The apologies posted to Twitter contain further components in the form of opening and closing formulae and the option of whether or not to address the interlocutor by name. Typically, opening formulae include the greeting, “Hi”, while closing formulae include expressions of gratitude, “Thanks.” The distribution of greetings and closing formulae within the dataset suggests that they are characteristic of apologies posted by companies (19% of corporate apologies included a greeting, and the same proportion included a closing formulae) but not of the apologies posted by ordinary Twitter members, who did not use these features at all in combination with apologies. The contrast in opening formulae is illustrated in the following pair of messages.

@username Hi [name deleted], am sorry for all the trouble. I'm would like to offer assistance. Just follow/DM me tag. Thanks ^AF  
Dellcares Wed, 01 Aug 2012 11:30

@username sorry mate only just checked twitter - had picnic at Earlswood Lakes. Hope you enjoyed dim sum!  
Male updater Sun, 06 May 2012 13:13

These openings and closings can be extended where Twitter members have the option of addressing the recipient of their message by name (in addition to their username) or by adding a closing signature. While signatures appeared in 37 percent of the apologies posted by companies, they did not occur at all in companies

posted by ordinary Twitter members. Similarly, use of names to personally address the recipient of the message occurred more often in apologies posted by companies than by 'ordinary' people (19 and 11 percent respectively).

On the surface, the use of greetings, closings and personal names would appear to be a rapport-building strategy which acknowledges the sociality obligations towards the customer for appropriate attention. The greetings and closings function as phatic communication, and increase the indirectness of the apology, hence mitigating its face-threatening potential for the company. The use of personal names operates in a complementary fashion as associative expressiveness (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 29) to individuate the message and mark it as distinct from a generic broadcast sent to all customers in response to complaints. As in other broadcast contexts, the non-obligatory use of personal names might serve to heighten the perception that the company's response is genuine and sincere (Clayman, 2010: 179). However, in comparison to the behaviour of ordinary Twitter members, the inclusion of greetings, closings and signatures appears to mark social distance rather than rapport. The social distance between the dyads of company-customer is distinct from the ordinary Twitter members: the person tweeting on behalf of the company may well not be known to the customer. The signature serves to mark the authorship of the message for benefit of both company and customer, so that both participants can track the individual communicative exchange at a later point if necessary. In contrast, social proximity resulting from frequent interactions between participants (whether on Twitter or in face-to-face contexts) renders the need less necessary for first name address, signatures and additional small talk (Coupland 2000) between 'ordinary' Twitter members. The repeated use of formulaic greetings and closing may in fact undermine the rapport-building potential of openings,



closings and naming options. If the rapport-building function is to use features which individuate a message repeatedly, then routine interactions may appear generic and therefore less sincere.

An alternative to opening an apologetic message with a greeting is to use a discourse marker instead. Examples occur in messages posted by 'ordinary' Twitter members and by companies.

@username1 @username2 Oh, I'm so sorry. :( He did seem so promising. Ah well, never mind. ;)

Male updater Mon, 11 Jun 2012 06:58

@username Oh I'm sorry :( I'll pass on your disappointment to our buyers.

UK Tesco Fri, 17 Aug 2012 07:06

The distribution of the discourse markers varied across the data, and occurred more frequently in the apologies posted by ordinary Twitter members than in apologies posted by companies. Fifteen percent of apologies posted by ordinary members and five percent of apologies posted by companies commenced with a discourse marker. The data sample contained a range of discourse markers in this message-initial position. These markers were similar in that they indicated discourse connection of the message to be a response to a previous utterance, and functioned as a form of associative expressiveness by modulating the apologisee's stance. This included upgraders which intensified the regret implied by the apology:

@username yikes! Really sorry about that :( Can you DM me your email address?

Starbucks Thu, 02 Aug 2012 23:42

@username Uh oh! So sorry about the delay. Who could resist a chocolate muffin? Enjoy it! We'll have you on your way as soon as we can!

Jet Blue Mon, 06 Aug 2012 22:54

Other discourse markers functioned as hedges which mitigated the force of the offence,

@username Ah, sorry, we don't sell the coffee itself.

John Lewis Retail Fri, 27 Apr 2012 08:29

Or projected empathy with the offended party

@username Aw man, sorry about the bag. I know what it's like when it finally gets broken in. We try not to leave out the "in" part. ^BT

Southwestair Thu, 10 May 2012 00:30

The pragmatic function and conversational register of these markers suggests a rapport enhancing involvement similar to that found in spoken apologies (Deutschmann, 2003: 55). The rapport enhancing potential is further supported by the alternative options for closing the apologetic message. Instead of a formulaic message of gratitude or signature, the apologies posted to Twitter by 'ordinary'

members and by companies sometimes closed with an emoticon as utterance final punctuation.

@username ... Oops, sorry, that should have read Friday. : )

Male updater Wed, 09 Nov 2011 18:15

@username Sorry. No coupons :(

Rubbermaid Sat, 12 Mar 2011 14:13

As with the distribution of opening discourse markers, emoticons were used less frequently by companies than 'ordinary' members. Twenty-five percent of apologies posted by 'ordinary' Twitter members as compared with five percent posted by companies contained at least one emoticon.

As Dresner and Herring (2010) point out, emoticons can serve both referential and illocutionary functions. In this dataset, the emoticons employed by companies similarly intensified the sentiments expressed in the apologetic messages. Two thirds of the emoticons used by companies were 'frowning faces', that is, they signalled sadness, or negative sentiment such as regret or embarrassment.

@username Sorry! I hate when that happens to me too :(

Rubbermaid Mon, 21 May 2012 15:41

@username I'm very sorry but I can't quite speak pure hashtag language!

#FeelingStupid #SadTesco :(

UKTesco Thu, 16 Aug 2012 10:18

Likewise, positive sentiment might be upgraded by the use of a 'smiley face', for example to intensify associative expressiveness like optimism. These emoticons occurred when the apology was accompanied by an offer of repair.

@username Sorry for the delay in answering. I have contacted our Canadian team and will let you know when I hear back from them :)

Rubbermaid Mon, 04 Apr 2011 13:43

@username Sorry! It was an error, should be @£1.19 each or 2 for @£2.00 - already flagged & should be sorted soon :)

UK Tesco Thu, 16 Aug 2012 20:27

The emoticons also served further pragmatic effects beyond or even at odds with the content of the utterance. In the following example, the tour operator expressed regret at being unable to help the customer. Rather than using an emoticon with the same sentiment (a 'frowning face'), the 'smiley face' is used as a downgrader, mitigating the offence which has taken place and is beyond the company's control.

@username Welcome home! Sorry we can't help you with the lines at the DMV. :)

Carnival Cruise Sun, 22 Apr 2012 13:56

The rapport-enhancing potential for emoticons to project solidarity between participants is illustrated by the use of 'smiley faces' with messages which request further interaction between company and customer,

@username yikes! I'm very sorry about that... can you DM me the details?

And follow me back :)

Starbucks Tue, 19 Jun 2012 17:02

@cin\_20 Sorry! I am now following you :)

Rubbermaid Tue, 21 Feb 2012 02:05

In summary, the optional components used to open and close the message offer rapport-building resources which may operate with greater or lesser associative expressiveness. Companies tend to use more resources which on the surface might be taken as rapport building (such as greetings and the use of names) but in the context of Twitter's discursive practices tend to signal social distance rather than proximity. While companies do use features associated with rapport-building orientation (such as conversational discourse markers and emoticons), this is less frequent than the use of this communicative style by 'ordinary' Twitter members. When resources like emoticons are employed, these work in harmony with the components of the apology which have the potential to rebuild rapport and restore the company's reputation.

## **6. Conclusion**

The data in this study has shown that there are number of additional components that may be combined with a formulaic IFID such as *sorry* or *apologise*. Those additional components may be used in the service of saving the apologiser's face and re-establishing rapport between the interactants in a strategy of image repair. The frequency with which the particular components are taken up by companies suggests a particular concern with reputation, where it is less likely for a company to restate the offence which has prompted the need for an apology or to include face-damaging explanations of why the offence occurred. Instead it is more likely for companies to make offers of repair as a form of corrective action, even if this requires that they make face-threatening demands on the customer to take further actions in order to gain remediation for the offence. Companies are also more likely to use greetings, closings, to use the customer's name and to provide their own signature at the end of an apology. While these features might appear to show a rapport-enhancing orientation of individual attention, within the conventions of Twitter, use of personal names is more likely to signal social distance. Similarly, more informal features of associative expressiveness such as opening discourse markers and closing emoticons are relatively infrequent in the companies' apologies compared with those posted by ordinary people.

The characteristic strategies typically found in the corporate apologies illustrate a number of risks to image repair which the apologiser must negotiate. First, the company must choose whether or not to restate the offence in the complaint. Reiterating the customer's complaint might function as attending to the offended party's sociality rights for individualised acknowledgement, avoiding distancing strategies which might be regarded as insincere and so restoring the potential for rapport. However, restating the customer's problem may further

damage the company's reputation by drawing attention to faulty goods or service:

the need to repair rapport must be offset against the need to repair reputation.

Second, the use of features such as use of personal names or expressing thanks as a closing formulae that might indicate rapport in spoken discourse, may instead suggest social distance and formality within the context of Twitter. Third, the brevity of a Twitter message and the necessarily multi-party nature of responding to a customer complaint as indicated through the use of additional questions and imperatives mean that remediation for the original offence through a single tweet is not guaranteed. Within this data set, there was little evidence of companies reporting back to the customer that corrective action had been taken. In some cases, this gave rise to further dissatisfaction. In the following exchange, the need for confirmation of corrective action was indicated through the customer's response to the company apology the following day.

@username Again we are very sorry for any inconvenience & disappointment.

We will ensure the branch is aware of the correct procedure

Waitrose Mon, 13 Aug 2012 13:03

@waitrose can you tell me if u have spoken to the branch and I'd appreciate knowing which branch you have spoken to

Tue, 14 Aug 2012 07:18

@username We have been in contact with the Westbury Park branch.

Tue, 14 Aug 2012 07:50

@waitrose thanks v much. I will speak to them this weekend too. Massively disappointed in this response and service.

Tue, 14 Aug 2012 07:53

It would seem that making an offer of repair as a form of corrective action may not be enough to repair the company's reputation or rapport with their customers: additional strategies may be needed.

The data used for this study is limited by the absence of evidence of the customers' and companies' perceptions of the apologies as more or less successful, and the extent to which the style of apologies might be constrained by factors such as the corporate training protocols. Ethnographic style observations, surveys and interviews with customers would be needed to explore this further. Future research might also trace cross-cultural differences in how corporate apologies are made and received, and how this might vary according to sector (finance, technology, food, fashion) or to the target demographic for each company's audience. Given the continued growth of Twitter, and of a wider online culture which encourages customers to voice their opinions through reviews and rankings, this study is thus but a first step which indicates a rich area for further analysis of politeness in online contexts.

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